

An interview with Howard L. Sharpe

HOWARD L. SHARPE

An Interview Conducted by

Carl A. Jones

June 11, 1981

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NARRATOR DATA SHEET

Name of narrator: Howard L. Sharpe

Address: 4933 Wabash Ave., Terre Haute 47803 Phone: 877-2604

Birthdate: 01/05/16 Birthplace: Vincennes, IN

Length of residence in Terre Haute: 1916-1924 and 1936-1981

Education: High school: Gary Lew Wallace, 1934.

Indiana State University, B.S., M.S. 1940

Occupational history: Teacher and coach.

Special interests, activities, etc. Sports

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HOWARD L. SHARPE

Tape 1

August 27, 1981

North High School Gymnasium, Terre Haute, IN 47804

INTERVIEWER: Carl A. Jones

TRANSCRIBER: Kathleen M. Skelly

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CAJ: We're talking with Coach Howard Sharpe, currently the basketball and golf coach at Terre Haute North High School. Coach Sharpe is in his 42nd year of coaching. Almost all of those years have been spent here in Terre Haute and in Vigo County. We're going to talk with him about some of his recollections of sports in Terre Haute and Vigo County in the years since he's been here.

Coach, when you first came to Terre Haute, I know the set-up of the high schools was completely different than it is now where we have only three high schools in Vigo County. What did that make it like in sports, particularly in basketball in those days?

SHARPE: Well, in basketball, see we had 15 teams in the county. We had a 15-team sectional and it made the sectional -- only one team drew a bye -- and it was tough. I mean a lot of the little schools had real good teams. And, of course, we had Gerstmeyer and State High /Indiana State University Laboratory School/ and, you know, Wiley. And, of course, we had all the . . . Blackhawk and Fontanet and Glenn and Prairie Creek . . . we had fifteen teams. Oh, the sectional took a long time to run and, at the same time, it was really contested. And not only that, but the Wabash Valley tournament was so big in those years. There was one stretch there when there was 122 teams in the Wabash Valley tournament. They came from . . . some of them came from Illinois and some from Indiana, and the basketball was really contested.

CAJ: Who were some of the coaches that you can remember in the Vigo County schools back in those days?

SHARPE: Oh, well, of course, we had . . . Fred Spence was up north, you know, at Otter Creek. And we had, of course, we had Cy Proffitt at Wiley and, of course, you had . . . most of the years you had Willard Kehrt at Garfield. And then, of course, Jack Williams coached out at Glenn. And we had

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SHARPE: Casey Decker at Glenn and also Casey coached at West Terre Haute. And, of course, we had Donald Easterbrook, the old Indiana State player. He was there. And, of course, we had Paul "Shorty" Thomas. He coached some teams. And we had Jerry Eder and, of course, our mayor, Pete Chalos. He coached at Prairie Creek at one time. And, of course, we had Bud Purcell. He coached at Pimento.

CAJ: Ed Dean.

SHARPE: Oh, Ed Dean, yeah. I remember Ed at Fontanet. I was just trying to think . . . you know that's been a long time ago, you know.

CAJ: Yes, it has.

SHARPE: And some of the names . . . you know, it's hard to recollect the names. But everything . . . we had a lot of good coaches and we had a lot of good competition.

CAJ: Right.

Of course, we had a lot more boys able to play basketball under those circumstances than we do now, where we are down to just three schools in Vigo County. Which system do you like the best -- where we had 15 high schools or where we had three?

SHARPE: I'll go back to the old any day. I liked the 15 teams and all the competition and every kid getting a chance to play. Right now there's not that many kids get to play. So, many of them they don't . . . the little schools, that was great. It didn't make any difference whether they . . . if they had . . . like I coached . . . like in 1940 I only had about 25 boys in the school I was in. But those kids . . . we had a good team. And it's great that all those kids got to play. I'd go back to the old days any-time. I mean I guess we all live in the past but because as far as I'm concerned, the more that get to take part, the better a program is. And right now there's not enough of them get to take part.

CAJ: Well, now when you first came here as a student at Indiana State Teachers College, it was then, I know you were a basketball player at Indiana State. Who were your coaches there?

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SHARPE: Of course, the coach at Indiana State was Wally Marks. And you know Wally came to Indiana State when he was real young, and I played some for Wally. And then, of course, I played for Glenn Curtis. And then, of course, Duane Klueh and Paul Wolf coached that varsity at Indiana State one time. In other words, those were the main coaches. And then, of course, Johnny Wooden came and . . . In other words, there's been a lot of coaches through the years.

CAJ: Now, how would you compare say, the schedule that Indiana State played back in those days with the schedule that it plays now when it's in the Missouri Valley Conference and playing teams with the caliber of Tulsa and Wichita State and so forth? Did Indiana State play a tough schedule in those days or was it mostly teams from Indiana?

SHARPE: We didn't play in that good a conference or anything, but at the same time we caught a lot of teams going through. Like we'd catch Wyoming on their way to the Madison Square Garden or someplace, and we'd play . . . we played some good teams, but mostly ours was Indiana like Butler and Franklin and those teams. Although we had a pretty good schedule, I'd say now their shcedule is better. Because they're in this conference of Wichita and Tulsa and New Mexico State and all that. I think the schedule's better now.

CAJ: One of my earliest remembrances of Glenn Curtis was, of course, as basketball coach at Martinsville. I can remember before he came to Indiana State he had several state championship teams at Martinsville. And when he came here, he had a nickname. They called him "The Old Fox." It must have been an experience playing basketball under him?

SHARPE: Yes. He's probably one of the five best basketball coaches that ever coached basketball in Indiana. He was an "ol' fox." There was no question about that. He was a master psychologist. And he got the most out of material that you'd ever want to get because he just had a knack. (laughs) He'd keep you on the bench and get you so mad . . . so wild, wound up. And then he'd turn you loose just at the right time and everything. He was a

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SHARPE: master; there's no question about that. He won championships . . . I saw his team one year, I think about /1973. They couldn't beat their way out of a paper bag, and he won (laughing) a state championship with them. I mean by just . . . by just playing together and teaching fundamentals and you know . . . He was a master; there's no question about that.

CAJ: Would you say that he was responsible for out-coaching the other coach in several of your games when you played at Indiana State?

SHARPE: You could do that in the old days. It's not so much that way now as it used to be. But, yes. He naturally . . . he'd win a lot of games that they wouldn't . . . even when I started coaching, I'd take him with me. And if I could get him to tell me exactly what he thought about the other team and what my team could do, I wouldn't have any trouble winning at all. I mean he was just a master at knowing what to do to the other team -- know when to run with the other team /or/ know when to do this to the other team. And he just . . . well, he was just absolutely great.

CAJ: Where did Indiana State play its home games back in those days?

SHARPE: Well, we played when . . . the time I was around we played in what's now the women's gymnasium. And we used to get big crowds in that place, you know, for that size of place. And we had some great games there. You wouldn't believe that competition that was played in a gym no bigger than that. Now . . . right now it's not as good as a high school gym as far as I'm concerned, but when it's . . . boy, we had the games in there.

CAJ: What was it like traveling to games in those days? What method did you have of traveling?

SHARPE: Oh, (laughs) we got there the best we could. I rode the first Indiana State bus -- the old boxcar, the old blue one. I was on that first trip and Glenn's feet almost froze. They looked at the capacity of the radiator and put that much anti-freeze in it. And old Charlie was driving (I forgot what Charlie's last name was), but old Charlie was driving and the bus froze up.

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CAJ: The first trips that you remember taking were on Indiana State's bus?

SHARPE: And they didn't put enough anti-freeze in it. They didn't allow for all the hose underneath the thing. And the bus froze up on the way over to Ball State. And we almost froze. And, of course, in those years we didn't get to go to hotels. We had to sit in the lobby at a hotel and get warm and then play a game. And I never will forget it. We lost the game 41 to 40.

And coming back, we got about half way from Muncie to Indianapolis and Glenn's feet froze. And they had to stop the bus and get into an old filling station that had a pot-bellied stove. And we had to massage Glenn's feet in order to keep his feet from freezing. And we had to wait, and they got a Greyhound Bus out of Indianapolis to bring us back. And we got in about 5:30 in the morning. And Charlie, he didn't get in with the first Indiana State bus You see that ol' bus. It's still in the lot there. And they . . . I think they even (laughing) use it once in a while. But that was the first trip And, oh, you talking about traveling, we had a hard time getting to places. Then it got better, you know. We got that Western Motor and the Turner's and, you know, things. And it got better and things. But now, flying and everything, it's . . . ha, ha . . . it's a difference between going first class and . . . we didn't care though. We didn't care that much because all of us loved to play basketball so well that we'd almost walked there to get to play.

CAJ: The game of basketball has changed, I know, in that length of time since you were talking about those days. For one thing, the boys are a lot taller than they used to be. I can remember -- and I'm sure that you can, too -- when if a team had a basketball player six feet tall, he was considered one of the big men of the team -- maybe the big man. And now, /if a/ kid's six feet tall, he'd just about have to play guard.

SHARPE: Yeah. Whatchacallit (laughing) I remember the one . . . our big men. One of them was Lloyd Julian who played at Wiley. Lloyd was 6'4"-214 /pounds/. And we thought he was a huge man. Then we had a fellow about 6'6" on the team. But on the whole,

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SHARPE: every . . . the size has changed so much and the caliber of players /has/ changed so much. Of course, they get better food, better medical; they get better coaching than they did in the old days because the game has become a science. And, oh, there's just no comparison. Now, you talking about the game changing, we used to go back to the center for every jump ball. And that made a difference. And you didn't have to bring the ball over to the center of the floor. You didn't have a 3-second rule. Somebody could camp somebody right underneath there, and you had a hard time keeping him from getting the ball. The game has just changed . . . and the shooting! In 1940, the average high school team shot 22% in the United States. That's 22% of the shots went in the basket. Why if you don't hit 50% now and it's in the sectional, you don't even . . . you might as well not even show up! Because it's . . . they're so much better.

Aw, the rules has changed. The shooting . . . in the old days they used to stand one guy in front of the basket, and he'd protect the basket. And he wouldn't leave the basket. Glenn Curtis is the first coach that put the fifth man into the offense, put him down the floor into the offense. /They/ used to stand a guy right -- the biggest, meanest guy -- right in front and dare somebody to come to the basket.

CAJ: They called him the back guard.

SHARPE: The standing guard.

CAJ: You had a back guard and a floor guard, I remember.

SHARPE: Yeah. Running guard, they called the other one.

And Glenn put that man into the game . . . the first of anybody.

They used to shoot the ball underhand, and one man used to shoot all the free throws. He was captain and he shot everything, did everything. You know he was the . . . and now, of course, everybody shoots their own free throws.

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SHARPE: And you used to . . . oh, /the/ two-handed shot . . . when I was in school, we'd shoot that two-hand chest shot. And why, today you couldn't get one of them up in the air. And then the jumps . . . running jump shot and all this . . . and the game has changed so much that, oh, you just can't believe that it's the same game.

CAJ: Right.

As we're talking now, we're sitting here in the Terre Haute North gymnasium and this is a nice big gymnasium with 4,400 seats in it. And I see, I think, two physical education classes going on at the same time. This will be a far cry from some of the gymnasiums in Vigo County when you first came around here -- like the Otter Creek gym and the gym at Prairie Creek and some of them.

SHARPE: Oh, yeah, yeah. You used to have the top . . . The ceiling used to be the top of the backboard. And you'd ricochet the ball off the ceiling or you'd ricochet it off the walls and everything else. And I've played where people'd trip you going down the floor. They'd have their feet sticking . . . you had to touch the crowd before you were out of bounds. If you were on the road, why (laughs) they'd trip you and everything else. And now, here we got 4400 seats and we got ten baskets for them to practice on. Throughout the United States this gym here is considered great -- in some of the other states, you know. And this is just average in Indiana.

CAJ: Now, I remember your first year at Gerstmeyer High School in Terre Haute was 1944-45. What did you use for a gymnasium there? I know you didn't have a gymnasium to play your home games in.

SHARPE: We only had a thing about 30, 35 feet wide and about 60 feet long, an old upstairs of an old building at Third Avenue and 13th Street. And we had to hang . . . we hung lights, just parts of fixtures over bare wires. One reason /Bobby/ Leonard became an all-American out of that gym is that the ceiling used to leak and we used to have to put buckets to catch the water. And Leonard got so good dribbling the ball in and out of the water buckets so that he . . . And if we didn't have enough buckets, why he had to know where the water spots were at. And then . . . they learned to look up when they was dribbling so they could dodge the

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SHARPE: water and everything else. And, of course, we had all kinds of handicaps which . . . You know, Indiana basketball has been great then and it is now. Oh, we didn't have anything! Only we had real hot steam pipes along the walls and if a kid got tripped or fell or something and if you wouldn't watch, he'd get pinned into the hot water pipes and get blisters. But it didn't stop them. They still played.

CAJ: The Leonard that Coach Sharpe was referring to was, of course, Bobby Leonard, who played for him at Gerstmeyer and later was an All-American at Indiana University. He played for many years in the National Basketball Association and then coached. And his last coaching job was with the Indiana Pacers who he coached to several ABA American Basketball Association championships and also in the NBA.

Who were some of the other outstanding players that you had at Gerstmeyer besides Bobby Leonard?

SHARPE: Well, of course, you hate to start mentioning players because you never remember all of them. You know what I mean, you never get them all. But, of course, Gene Verostko was a great athlete.

CAJ: Still is, of course.

SHARPE: Yes. And still is. And Gene Verostko was my captain in '44-'45. And, of course, we . . . I had a fellow in '48, '49 or '50 . . . along with Bobby Leonard. I had Bob Grose that's one of the top 15 people with IBM Corporation in the United States now. He was such an unusual player that most people didn't realize what a great player he was.

And, of course, I had Bobby Leonard and, of course, later Tommy John. And I had the Newton brothers -- Bill and Steve -- and Ronnie Greene. And, of course, Bob Hickman is now mayor of Charleston, Illinois. He was one of the . . . he's the best defensive player I've ever coached, I think.

CAJ: Don't forget the three Andrews.

SHARPE: Oh, Harley, Arley, Uncle Harold and . . . oh, they were great! And, of course, since I've been here at North, why I've had Larry Deakins and I've had . . . why I thought the Erwin boys were good players and, of course, Nate Mills here and . . . oh, I've had so many of them that . . .

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CAJ: Charlie Hall.

SHARPE: Ooh! Charlie Hall's the best . . . I've not seen a better hook shooter in the state of Indiana than Charlie Hall. Charlie Hall was after . . . Ray Goddard was one of the best competitors you'd ever want to see. I was just trying to think of . . . you know, there's so many of them that you hate to start mentioning them because you leave out some and, you know, if you don't mention them and they hear the tape, why then they think, "Well, coach has forgotten me." I haven't forgotten any of them!

CAJ: I remember I was a spectator at the game in 1953 when your Gerstmeyer team with the Andrews twins and Uncle Harold and Jack Smith and Bill Bolk came as close to winning a state championship as any Terre Haute team has ever come. You lost by one point to South Bend Central in the championship game. And there was an incident in that game that I don't think could happen under today's rules.

First of all, I'm not talking about when they fouled out your best player, Arley, with . . . when everyone in press row except the officials scored . . .

SHARPE: A hundred and eight newspaper and radio men had it correct, and the only one that had the wrong number of fouls on my player Arley was the score-keeper.

CAJ: Right. Now, that could maybe happen today. I don't know, but the one . . . the incident that I'm referring to was when traveling was called on South Bend Central with their one-point lead with about a 15-, 12 or 15 seconds to go . . .

SHARPE: Seventeen seconds to go.

CAJ: Seventeen seconds to go in the game and the referee rolled the ball across the floor to the other referee at that time before they would give it to you out of bounds. And in those days the clock kept running while he was rolling that ball across there.

SHARPE: The rule that you have now that the clock stops on infractions like that now, it came into basketball because we lost the state championship on that play. And so (laughs) it locked the door

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SHARPE: after the horse is gone. I mean . . . but now if /there is an/ infraction, they stop the clock and you get to throw the ball. The clock don't start until you throw it in. We were set to throw the ball in on the one side with 17 seconds to go, and he rolled it clear across the floor and we got four seconds. And I can still see the shot. We hit the back edge of the rim. It was as perfectly straight . . . Harley shot it, Harley Andrews, and it was as straight as you'll ever want to see a shot. But it was about an inch too long.

CAJ: Right.

SHARPE: And there was Terre Haute's state championship.

CAJ: Right.

In that same season in the semi-state tournament which was played at Bloomington in those days -- at Indiana University's fieldhouse -- your team came from far behind at half-time to beat Evansville Central. Was that . . . that was one of the greatest comebacks I've ever seen. Was it one of the greatest?

SHARPE: I've had more people . . . I've had more people say that it's the greatest basketball game they've ever seen in their lives.

We were down . . . we were playing Evansville Central, which is as good a team as I've ever seen in southern Indiana -- /John/ Harrawood and all that bunch, and Clayton. We were down 47-31 at the half. And while we was having some trouble defensively and everything -- 'cause they were great -- I got the thing straightened out at the half. And Uncle Harold and Jack Smith got a couple things straightened out on defense and everything. And we come from behind and I never will forget it. We'd get right close to them and then they'd get away from us again. And it was one minute and 36 seconds to go before the game was over when we went one point ahead. And then, of course, Jack Smith and Bill Bolk and Harley and Arley and Uncle Harold could handle that ball like it was a baseball. And we held that ball for . . . well, we won the game, 78-71. And if it'd gone a few minutes more, we'd a won it by 20 points because -- a minute or two more -- because we had complete control of the

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SHARPE: game. It was . . . I have never seen in my life. I've seen a lot of great games, but I have never seen a game where a team was so dominated the first half and then took over and dominated the thing the second half and played brilliant basketball. It's probably one of the best basketball games I've ever seen in my life.

CAJ: Right.

And you had . . . the following year you had four of those five starters back again. Harley had graduated; Arley and Uncle Harold and Smith and Bolk were back again, and Jerry Sturm went on your starting five that year. And you went back over to the state finals again, and who'd you run into over there that year?

SHARPE: Ooooh (laughs) just . . . every time I see Bobby Plump, I say, "Hey, Bob. I've seen enough of you. I don't want to ever see you again." And we played Milan. And Milan . . . we had pretty good control of the game until 49 seconds to go in the half. And then they went to that . . . they went to that delay. And I'm telling you, we couldn't . . . as good as we were, we couldn't. we just couldn't go get the ball from them. And they fouled out Bolk and things, and they beat us 60 to 41. And I had . . . the year before we were 31 and 3 and this year we were 31 and 4. And, of course, Milan that night turned around to beat Muncie Central for the state championship and, of course . . .

CAJ: Last small school ever to win the State.

SHARPE: Yes. And I would be involved!

CAJ: Yeah. (laughs)

Now, you mentioned a while ago when you were running down a list of your former players, you mentioned Bob Hickman as one of the best defensive players. Early in the state finals his senior year he played a great defensive game, I thought.

SHARPE: He guarded (laughing) Oscar Robertson. I used to put him on Oscar. You know Oscar's the best basketball player that's ever played in the state of Indiana as far as I'm concerned.

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CAJ: Or maybe any other state.

SHARPE: Any other state. He was fantastic.

And I'd sic . . . I'd sic Hickman on him. And I can hear Oscar now say, "Hey, man. Is you mad at me? You're guarding me too close." And he was just beating on poor ol' Oscar and he'd guard him. And then, of course, when he went to . . . Bob Hickman got a scholarship to Kansas and played regular and was captain at Kansas. And Oscar was captain of Cincinnati University and he used to guard him all the time in the NCAA /National Collegiate Athletic Association and all those games during the year. But Hickman is probably the best defensive player that I've ever coached, and Bobby Leonard is probably the best offensive player I've ever coached. And I would say that probably Goddard and . . .

CAJ: Ray Goddard.

SHARPE: . . . Ray Goddard and Hickman and Gene Verostko are probably my three best competitors that's ever played for me in Terre Haute.

CAJ: Right. Bob Hickman is now the mayor of Charleston, Illinois, isn't he?

SHARPE: Yes, he's the mayor and he still comes to see me.

CAJ: Now, let's switch if we can to another sport right now. I know that throughout your career at Gerstmeyer High School, besides being the basketball coach, you were also a baseball coach. You've already mentioned Tommy John as a basketball player. What was it like having Tommy John as a pitcher on your high school baseball team?

SHARPE: Well, there's no question that Tommy John is the best baseball player . . . I mean he's gone farther than any player I've ever had. I've had a lot of great players. I'd say Tommy John was an unusual player. I mean unusually good baseball player. He was intelligent. He had the desire. He had something that no coach or no . . . I don't think anybody can teach you. He had a natural sinker. He'd grip the ball and he would throw the ball and it would come up to the plate. And just

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SHARPE: about the time it'd get to the plate, it would just like drop off of the table. The big leaguers today bat Tommy John and they go back to the bench shaking their heads thinking, "Well, why . . . I can hit him." That's just what they think. That ball nose dives and takes a dive, and they hit it and beat it into the ground. They get sometimes 21 outs in a game on ground balls. And Tommy John . . . I'll tell you. He pitched the last game for me against Wiley out to the old stadium. And then I talked to the Cleveland . . . John Schulte was Cleveland scout in those years. And, of course, they gave Tommy \$40,000 for signing, and he got \$70,000 for his first five years, I think. But you can see what a tremendous attitude he has and desire to be. But I've had a lot of other good baseball players.

CAJ: Now, today the major leaguers claim that that's . . . that there's something illegal about that sinker ball. I've heard it said that Tommy uses an illegal pitch. But if he had it ever since high school . . .

SHARPE: No. He didn't. You see, the pitchers doctor the ball. They cut 'em, get some way to cut 'em or they put saliva on them and they take crazy . . . they'll make real crazy moves. Well, Tommy's doesn't do that. Tommy's will come up to the plate and then it just sinks real quick. And what you do, you swing over the top of it. And you top it and you beat it into the ground. And I don't think Tom . . . I don't think Tom has to doctor the ball.

When the scout was talking to me about signing Tommy John, he said, "Tommy doesn't have the major league fast ball." I said, "No." But I said, "There's one thing you'd better take a look at that sinker, because it's something that you can't teach him or I can't teach him." He's got a real loosy-goosey move and that thing . . . and I'll tell you this, I recommended \$50,000 and he only got \$40,000. In other words, I told the scout that he'd be worth it and when he went to Cleveland . . . And then it's funny how he got to Chicago. They were making a trade, and a catcher that had gone from Cleveland was catching for the White Sox. I forget what his name was. But anyway he said, "Cleveland's not that high on Tommy. Why don't you make 'em throw him in?" And Tom was a throw-in. And, boy, if that wasn't a beautiful throw-in!

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CAJ: (chuckles)

SHARPE: I mean . . . and, of course, Tom and Eddie Stanky for a . . . And Eddie used to give him a new suit of clothes for every time he got so many ground balls. And I don't know how many new suits Tom got for . . . he had 'em beating up on the ground all day long. And then when they went to the Dodgers, why Tom had another great record there.

But baseball, I still don't think anybody is . . . had baseball players like I had in high school. We won 800 games -- a little over 800 games -- and we only lost 67 games. I still . . . I may not have the best basketball record in the state right now . . . I'm third all-time. But I'll tell you one thing. Nobody knows it but I got the best (laughs) baseball record in the state.

CAJ: That's true. When you were baseball coach at Gerstmeyer High School, where did you practice and play your home games?

SHARPE: Well, we played at Spencer Field. And we had . . . of course, I lined the field. I dragged the field. Of course, I got help from the park department. They helped me, you know. But we had a hard time having a place to play, but, aw, those games were beautiful! They're as good a high school game as you'd ever want to see. I mean we had some great baseball teams. While we didn't get to play quite as many games, sometimes we'd only be 30 and 1 for the season and things, but we used to beat Wiley 18 to nothing. And, of course, we used to have more trouble with Garfield 'cause Disch /Donas Dischinger/ did a real good job with Garfield. Once in a while they'd beat us. But I think Schulte beat me once in all the time. And most teams didn't . . . played me for . . . Some teams played me 40, 50 times and never won a game. But, of course, it wasn't me. I mean, I didn't do the pitching and I didn't do the batting.

CAJ: I've always thought that one of the reasons that Terre Haute teams have had so much success in baseball tournaments like the Little League tournaments and Babe Ruth League tournaments, Connie Mack League tournaments, American Legion

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CAJ: tournaments -- we had a World's championship Babe Ruth team back in 1955 as you remember -- and one of the reasons for that I know was a program that you started when you were a summer recreation director up at . . . well, first at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, I think, and then out at . . . up at Spencer Field. And you came up . . . you invented a way of teaching hitting to young kids. I wonder if you could tell about that.

SHARPE: Well, whatchacallit . . . I invented the game of T-baseball first in the United States about 40 years ago. In other words, I was having trouble . . . A man would bring his son out and he'd say, "Sharpie, I want this boy to play. He's five years old." And I had problems. I was afraid the boy would get killed. Second, I was afraid the boy if he didn't get killed, he'd get hit and get seriously hurt and be afraid of the ball. Pitchers couldn't throw it over, and the kids couldn't stand to wait while the pitcher was trying to throw it over. And if he could throw it over, the catcher couldn't catch it. And so it'd go to the screen. And therefore, you couldn't have the kid standing. And if you want young people -- well, anybody for that matter, even adults -- if you want people to play, they've got to have success. And so, I decided that I . . . I went down to Florida and . . . I didn't invent the "T." Because I played a lot of golf. But I saw the professional tee that's on all kinds of swivels and everything. So I come back to Gerstmeyer's shop and had 'em take a big sheet of metal, put a black pipe on it, and put a radiator hose in it. Then I'd put the ball on the hose, and then I'd play baseball off with a boy hitting off a tee.

CAJ: In other words, you'd set the ball right on the tee at home plate and let him swing at it just sitting there on the tee.

SHARPE: Yes, and . . . why I would teach him to hit the ball out in front of him, not even with the ball so that he'd learn to get his arms out in front. And I had some . . . a lot of these kids . . . it's just beginning to wear off here in Terre Haute. In other words, they're not teaching it . . . for a number of years now they haven't taught it my way and it . . . they're just . . . they don't

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SHARPE: realize that they're gonna lose. In other words, you see, I didn't have to worry about the pitcher getting it over. I didn't have to worry about the pitcher hurting his arm. I didn't have to worry about the catcher catching it. You got a prize every time. Of course, you know somebody's going to miss it once in a while, and you get a base hit. Well, it's all over the United States now, but I originated it about 40 years ago because of the problem. I had all kinds of problems with the game.

A kid would walk . . . a little, teeny kid'd come up, pull on my pants leg, and say, "How come I didn't get to bat that inning?" Well, then I had to originate the rule that all 12 players on the team got to bat that inning. And when that inning was over -- after they all batted -- then we'd change sides, because some of the teams we couldn't get out. And then the last two kids didn't get to run the bases. So, the next game I'd have to put them up first and second so that they'd take their turns not running the bases at the end.

Then little kids'd throw the bats and hit somebody, so I had to put a circle on each side of home plate and put the catcher on the side opposite the batter so that he couldn't get hit with the ball.

Then the next thing that happened, the ball would roll off the tee. And there was more right-handed batters than left-handed batters. And the right-handed batter would start to run toward first and my catcher would be on the first base side because I didn't want him to get hit with a bat. They'd run together. So, I had to draw a little circle eight feet out in front of the plate and say to the catcher, "Don't go after the ball unless it crosses the line," And then I stopped that.

But I can show you and everything how the game originated. Even today in anything we do in school teaching or coaching or anything, we've got to find success for every individual. And that's one thing that I've been successful doing in coaching 42 years in high school. I've been able to find a way to find success for all my boys and girls.

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CAJ: That's very good. About how many kids would take part in a program like that at Spencer Field in the summertime?

SHARPE: Well, like at Woodrow /Wilson Junior High? I had 22 teams, and everybody would bring the neighbor kids! I'd say there's a limit of twelve. But Mrs. So-and-so is a friend of Mrs. So-and-so, and first thing you know, little junior would be on the team and I wouldn't know it. But sometimes I'd have 16 on a team! And I'd have 22 teams of them. The most I ever had was 22 teams of them. But there was at least 12 to 16 on every team. You know what I mean.

CAJ: Right.

SHARPE: And I had 71 teams altogether of different size. And I used to play 15 games a day at Woodrow on that little space. It was the biggest program. And I don't think I've ever seen a program -- I'm just this cocky -- I've never seen a better program in the state of Indiana that more kids got to play. Every kid got to play at least two games a week. And then I moved it to Spencer Field and I started with 28 teams. Willard /Kehrt had a pretty good program there, and then I had 28 teams to start with and I ended up with 64 there.

CAJ: So, it's no surprise that . . . with 64 teams playing at Spencer Field and 28 or so at Woodrow /Wilson, it's no surprise that Terre Haute came through with some baseball players in those leagues.

SHARPE: No. We had the program. And you gotta use . . . you gotta know what you're doing. See, any game is fundamental. I don't care what game it is. You have to be fundamentally sound. I used to take and hide the color of the baseball. I'd give the pitcher a pink ball. And the batter had to call pink before he could hit it. If he couldn't call the color of the ball, then he couldn't get to hit it. Or he'd say, "Yellow." And then he could swing. Or he could say, "White," or he could say, "Blue," or, "Purple." And he had to call the color of the ball before he was allowed to hit the ball. And I had 'em real sharp.

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SHARPE: And then if I'd find a boy that wouldn't swing at the ball, I used to take the bat away from him. And I'd put him up to the plate and I'd say "Just stand there." And he'd say, "Well, I can't hit it." "Well," I'd say, "young man . . . young man, you have the bat and you're not looking for the ball and you're not hitting the ball so you don't need the bat. Now, do you want to hit the ball?" They'd say, "Yes." I'd say, "O.K. Then I'll let you take the bat, but when it comes between your knees and shoulders and it's over that plate, I expect you to beat at it even if you miss it. But if you're not going to swing, just let me take care of the bat for you." And I'd get 'em real aggressive.

Now, the teams at Gerstmeyer -- you won't believe this -- but I averaged . . . my teams averaged 108 to . . . some of the teams 108 runs to the opponents' 8. So, most high school teams do not swing at the ball very well. But when you played Gerstmeyer baseball teams, I'm going to tell you something. You'd better not get it over the plate because there's going to be somebody after it with some wood.

CAJ: They're going to swing at it anyway.

I know that now the last couple of years here at Terre Haute North High School you've had a new experience in coaching, and that is that you now have to coach the girls' golf team here. That must be quite an experience.

SHARPE: Oh, the girls are great! Girls pay attention. They improve. I've had three real good girls' golf teams right in a row. And little Eileen Torrence done a nice job for me. Of course, her dad did a lot of that, you know. He taught her golf long before she ever saw me. But I get 'em enthused about it just like . . . see, I may be 42 years at this thing right now, but I haven't lost my enthusiasm for the games. I go out . . . I'm just as interested . . . I'm sure not doing it for the money 'cause I could make a hundred thousand dollars as easy as falling off a log. But I'm sure not going to make it coaching. But how many people can say that they've gone through their life and their job has been their hobby? Well, my job has been my hobby and look how many kids I've helped. And look how many . . . look at the fun I've had to see some kid

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SHARPE: who didn't have good coordination improve his coordination and learn to work together with somebody else. And learned to listen to instructions and practice and figure that the harder you work, the luckier you get.

CAJ: That's true, very true.

Coach, there's one thing that we haven't touched upon and that was the . . . we've talked on high school sports and Indiana State University sports, but I know that when you were in your early days in Terre Haute we had some professional sports, too; namely, minor league baseball. Were you interested in the Terre Haute Three-I League team when they were here?

SHARPE: You better believe it! You remember the old -- maybe you don't -- but the old ball park at 25th . . . 26th and Wabash, the old board park. Would you believe it or not, when I was barely . . . I don't know how old I really was, but Jumbo Jim Elliott . . . I lived at 20th and Wabash and Jumbo Jim Elliott used to come on the summer car -- the old open summer /trolley/ car. And he'd have the summer car stop, and he'd pick me up and put me on the summer car and take me by the hand and walk me into the ball game out to the old ball park when they had, you know, Hollicker and Art Nehf and all those players. And that's where I got started. Another reason we've had such great baseball in Terre Haute was the old Three-I League. That old Three-I League was a great pitchers' league. And, oh, it just made me sick when we lost the Three-I League. You know, we don't have those teams any more.

Now, I remember when they moved to the stadium. We had Clanton, the first baseman, and all that. You know we had all those players come here. Joe Vosmik and all the . . . Warren Spahn and all of 'em played in that league. And, boy, I tell you I miss that Three-I League because that was a great thing for Terre Haute.

CAJ: Jumbo Jim Elliott went on to a fine major league career and, of course, we had . . .

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SHARPE: Aldridge, Vic Aldridge. Bill Butland, Harry Taylor/

CAJ: . . . we had players from this area like Mordecai Brown was from right around here.

SHARPE: Dizzy Trout.

CAJ: Dizzy Trout was from up at Sandcut and Art Nehf had a field named after him out at Rose Hulman Institute of Technology/ now.

SHARPE: Great pitcher.

CAJ: He was a Hall of Fame pitcher. Charlie Root pitched for the Terre Haute Tots.

SHARPE: Oooh, yeah.

CAJ: In the Three-I League.

SHARPE: It's so hard when you get as old as I am -- almost 66. You can't remember all these people. You know . . . oh, sometime you do but when . . . right when you sit down like this, you try to think of all of them. Aw, it's been . . . Terre Haute's had great . . . I never will forget Terre Haute was such a bustling place when the mines were all going, you know. And we had . . . in 1924-25 we had the interurban station -- all the Interurbans going out and all the mine trains going out and everything. This place was really a bustling place until about '24, '25.

CAJ: It certainly must have been.

Well, Coach, thank you very much for talking with us and best of luck in your 42nd year of coaching.

SHARPE: Well, I just hope I can get in these last four because I plan on quittin'. If my health remains great like it is, why I plan on quittin' August 1, 1985.

CAJ: Well, lots of luck. Thank you very much.

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